

Malcolm X: The Man Is His Ideas

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Introduction

In the book, *Black Rage* (1968), Grier and Cobbs offered this conclusion about Malcolm X:

"Malcolm's meaning for us lies in his fearless demand for truth and his evolution from a petty criminal to an international statesman - accomplished by a black man against odds of terrible magnitude - in America. His message was his life, not his words, and Malcolm knew it."

Indeed, Grier and Cobbs had made insightful observation of the man, yet the last statement is a misinterpretation of his message. Yes, Malcolm X's message was his life, but it cannot be said that it was not his words. For Malcolm X, his words were the product of his life. The ideas articulated in his public communication are manifestations of his life experiences. Similarly, the changes in his ideas too, reflect the changes in his life. Thus, it is more appropriate to remark that Malcolm X's message was his words, and his words were formulated from his life experiences.

This article attempts to show that a man is a product of his ideas because his ideas are a sum of the "pluses" and "minuses" he experiences in his lifetime. Malcolm X is a classic representation of the case. For this purpose, a brief account of his life is described, and then the main ideas that can be drawn from his public communication acts will be discussed. The latter is then examined against the former to indicate that Malcolm X did indeed speak his life - and this was his message.

Malcolm X : A brief background

Malcolm Little, born in Omaha on May 19, 1925, was the progeny of violence. His mother, Louise, was born as a result of her mother being raped by a white man in the West Indies. His father, the Reverend Earl Little was a Baptist minister from Georgia, who saw four of his six brothers die by violence, one by lynching and another shot to death by Northern white police. But Earl Little was not a frightened man. His fervent sermons were inspired by Marcus Garvey, a dynamic black orator who came from Jamaica

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to the United States in 1916 to organize the United Negro Improvement Association. The Littles moved from Omaha to Milwaukee and then to Lansing, Michigan, where the Reverend Little bought a modest home in a white neighbourhood. That choice, along with his militant weekday activities as a Garvey organizer, resulted in the Black Legion, a local white terrorist group, keeping Earl Little under close scrutiny. When Malcolm was not yet five, the house was burned down by members of the Ku Klux Klan. When he was six, his father met a violent death in the hands of a white mob.

For his mother, the aftermath was a disastrous battle of trying to keep the family together. The young widow took odd jobs in white homes to earn money, but the anti-black feeling in Lansing was so pronounced that she lost one job after another. Finally, under unavoidable strain, Louise Little suffered a breakdown and had to be confined for the next twenty five years to the State Mental Hospital at Kalamazoo. In his autobiography, Malcolm X recalled how she did not recognize him when he visited her later. For Malcolm X, white bigotry was the culprit. It caused his father's death and treated his mother so abominably. The effect on Malcolm was to produce a racial curse that clung to his mind and increasingly permeated his thinking. Violence and hate those twin ravagers - filled his soul (Metcalf, 1970; 338).

School life for Malcolm X was one that was filled with "nigger jokes." He was affectionately and popularly accepted as the "nigger" of his class. Fellow students and teachers who genuinely liked him never saw any harm in telling "nigger jokes" in his presence, while rival student cheering sections, watching Malcolm on the basketball court, "niggered" and "cooned" him throughout the game. Malcolm held his peace. He even became an outstanding student and, in the second semester of the seventh grade, was elected president of his class. However, try as he would, there was no way of shielding his "inferiority." While discussing the future with an English instructor cum advisor, a significant event happened to him. The advisor asked Malcolm if he had been thinking about a career. Malcolm had not, but he replied, "Well, yes sir, I've been thinking I'd like to be a lawyer." The advisor was surprised and said, "Malcolm, one of life's first needs is for us to be realistic. ...A lawyer - that's no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you can be. You're good with your hands - making things. Everybody admires your carpentry shop work. Why don't you plan on carpentry?" The incident convinced him that it was not intelligence or leadership that counted; it was the colour of one's skin. In his autobiography, Malcolm wrote, "It was then that I began to change inside. I drew away from white people."

After finishing the eighth grade, Malcolm X went to live with his half-sister, Ella, in Boston. From then onwards, Malcolm's life was the "hustle bustle" and "excitement" between Boston and New York, and especially Harlem. Malcolm X did almost everything that a petty Harlemite criminal did. For that he served six years and five months in prison. While in

detention, Malcolm X took a correspondence course in English, and began indulging in self-education. It was also in prison that he learned of the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad who claimed that he was a Messenger of Allah. Upon their visits to Malcolm, his brother Reginald and his sister Hilda were proselytizing the Black Muslim faith. Malcolm X then began a daily correspondence with Elijah Muhammad, seeking further information about the faith, and he redoubled his efforts at self-learning. Along with his reading, which now included Shakespeare, Socrates, Aesop and Nietzsche, he discovered a fondness for public speaking at the Prison Colony's weekly debating program. It was here that he first began lashing at the white inmates right to their faces, with his newly found intellectual skills.

In the summer of 1952, Malcolm X was paroled in the custody of his oldest brother Wilfred, who was also a full-fledged follower of the Nation of Islam. Wilfred gave Malcolm his introduction to the workings of Elijah Muhammad's religion. He was taught the daily ablutions and the prayers, and he strictly observed the dietary and abstinence laws of his new faith. Elijah Muhammad's version of Islam differed vastly in many respects from Orthodox Islam, but Malcolm did not know that then. For instance, the Black Muslim philosophy taught that the white man was a devil who had raped and plundered the world's non-white peoples and their goods. Recalling his own grim childhood, Malcolm eagerly sought and found evidence in the books he read of the white man's exploitation of non-whites. Thus, it was easy for Malcolm to accept Elijah Muhammad's description of the white man as a devil (Fax, 1970 : 11).

Being a Black Muslim, Malcolm now renounced his surname Little, which he called a "white slave-master name, imposed upon his paternal forebears by some blue-eyed devil." He adopted the name Malcolm X - the X replacing his African family name that was forever lost. By this time, Malcolm X had become a close associate of Elijah Muhammad, a dedicated and influential recruiter for the Nation of Islam, and Elijah Muhammad's most trusted and abled minister. This was also the time when Malcolm X became a most active spokesman and public speaker for the Black Muslim movement. So dedicated and committed was he to the movement and its philosophy, he actually breathed and lived for it. As far as he was concerned, Elijah Muhammad, the Honourable, could do no wrong. No one could have worked harder than Malcolm X for the Black Muslim movement and the Nation of Islam. As such, Malcolm X was attracting much attention from the news media. The black Muslim, as the media now called them, were gaining national attention. When the Mike Wallace Show was aired with the sensational title 'The Hate That Hate Produced,' in 1959, all that the white viewers could mainly recalled was that the Muslims were taught to hate them.

Malcolm X was becoming strong and a powerful media figure, but he always acted and spoke as the agent of "The Honourable Elijah Muhammad,"

whom he adored. However, in 1962, a rift began to grow between them. A statement Malcolm made after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, which was misunderstood by white America, finally caused Elijah Muhammad to silence Malcolm. Returning to New York, he learned from a close associate that the Muslims were preparing to kill him. After receiving no clarification from Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X knew that it was time for him to break away from the movement.

Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam but he remained a Muslim. He quickly got down to the business of forming an organization of his own which was politically oriented and based on black nationalism as a tool against the white oppressors. Malcolm X left the Black Muslims for the same reason he joined then - because he wanted to fight for the freedom of his people (Breitman, 1966). In April 1964, Malcolm performed the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, where he discovered the true preachings of Islam. The atmosphere of true brotherhood among Muslims of all races and colours that he witnessed and experienced during the pilgrimage made him reevaluate his philosophy about racism and the black problem in America. Malcolm X returned to America to spread the word of his new discoveries and what they had meant to him. But El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz remained as Malcolm X to the American press, which insisted on linking his name with violence and hatred. The obstacles were formidable, he related to Alex Haley in his autobiography, because his earlier public image, the so-called Black Muslim image, "kept blocking" him. The moderates avoided him as too militant, and the militants, because of his changed status, as too moderate. On February 21, 1965, while on the threshold of his potential, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, was assassinated in a tumult of shotgun pellets and pistol bullets.

Malcolm X : His ideas

In their analysis of the rhetoric of black Americans, Golden and Rieke (1971) concluded that Malcolm X, together with Martin Luther King and a few others, was one that made articulate and effective speeches that achieved rhetorical excellence. Malcolm X was also described as one of the most adaptive black American speakers, in terms of rhetorical strategies. Basically, Malcolm X's message was nothing less than the black man's quest in America for the "good life" based on freedom, justice, humanity and identity. Thus, it was the same message as the other Negro leaders then who were mainly assimilationists. However, for Malcolm X, though his goals were the same as the assimilationist goals, he could not believe that integration was the best route to those goals (Mullen, 1980). In order to adapt to what he believed were changing circumstances, Malcolm X became successively a separatist and a revolutionist (Golden & Rieke, 1971). Other than adapting to the different rhetorical situations that he was facing, this fact also indicates the changing ideas that was going on inside him as a result of the experiences

he was going through in his life as a black fighter. As Hamilton (1972) observes, Malcolm X's entire life was one of constant transition, and this had a great impact on his ideas.

Malcolm X's ideas can be traced to three main experiences in his life: while he was a black Muslim preaching separatism; and while he was reformulating his ideas after the break from the Nation of Islam; and after the pilgrimage to Mecca. During the last two, it can be said that Malcolm X was pointing towards a revolution, but not in the sense of an armed rebellion. In his years as a public speaker and spokesman for the Black Muslim movement, Malcolm X was preaching separation and frightening more white people than the social protest organizations that were demanding integration. The bold act of refusing integration was a challenge to a society that never intended to integrate the black Americans in the first place. Malcolm X knew that he was living in a society that was engaged in the systematic destruction of his people's self respect. To a large extent, the shadow of slavery still hung over America, and affected the daily life of every Americans. Slavery was the breeding ground for the racism that was creating the conflicting forces in mid-century America. Malcolm X, being a product of that society was convinced that integration was not the answer to the problem of his people. Malcolm X denounced the white man's democracy as a "brittle lie" and their Christianity a fraud. For this, Malcolm X was labeled a racist, a hatemonger, a dangerous fanatic and a black supremacist. But in reality, he was none of these things. In his speeches, Malcolm X did not preach black supremacy, instead, he preached black pride, black redemption, and black reaffirmation (Clarke, 1969).

In "Message to the Grassroots", which he delivered in late 1963 in Detroit, just before he left the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X reasoned out why integration was not the answer to the black problem. According to Malcolm X, the white administration then was not sincere in accepting integration. Using the analogy of the coffee being weakened by too much cream, Malcolm X appealed to the grassroots that the march on Washington became a mockery of their dream when white men infiltrated it. He also reasoned for a black unity in America in the form of a black nationalism. And like most of his public communication acts before this speech, Malcolm X called for separation and a revolution that is based on "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a head for a head, and a life for a life." Ross (1971) surmises that this was Malcolm X's justification for violence, the ancient *lex talionis*, the law of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.

The break from the Nation of Islam is a transitional phase in the development of Malcolm's ideas, marking important changes from his Black Muslim past, but not representing all the conclusions he reached, or tried to reach, before his death. In a formal press conference after the official break, Malcolm X held that separation was not the only solution to black liberation, but that it was the best solution and still a long-range program. Later, he

discontinued altogether any advocacy of a separate nation, and said that he thought Negroes should stay in the United States and fight for what was rightfully theirs. And again, he called for unity among black Americans, among the leaders and at the grassroots level. In organizing the Muslim Mosque Inc., Malcolm X broadened his ideas on black nationalism and appealed to youth. He now opened himself to working with whites, but insisted that there must be black unity before there could be black-white unity.

In what was hailed as the best talk he ever gave, "The Ballot or the Bullet", Malcolm X reminded blacks that they were not yet Americans, even though they had been here longer than "everything that came out of Europe, every blue-eyed thing." He cautioned the Negroes that their ballot is meaningless if white hypocrisy remained in the American system. He outlined the political, economic and social philosophy of his black nationalism, and reiterated that his organization would be willing to work with anyone, anywhere, anytime as long as they were "genuinely interested in tackling the problem head-on, nonviolently as long as the enemy is nonviolent, but violent when the enemy gets violent." Malcolm X also made it clear that Negroes should protect themselves if the government failed to. As Pinkney (1968) observes, what Malcolm X advocated was not the initiation of violence on the part of the Negroes, but rather, armed self-defense in an effort to protect oneself from violent attacks by racists.

The third phase in the development of Malcolm's ideas, i.e., after he returned from Mecca and the visits to the Middle East, Africa and Europe, did not get quite developed due to his assassination. What was obvious was that the previously non-compromiser, was now willing to accept "progressive whites" uniting with "revolutionary black." But to Malcolm, the role of the "progressive white" was not in black organizations, but in white organizations in white communities, convincing the rest of white Americans on the black cause. After what he witnessed in Mecca and Africa, he completely repudiated separationism as preached by the Black Muslims, but maintained ideological separation. To Malcolm X, the Afro-Americans, which he now used in place of Negroes, must transcend his enemy, not imitate him. Malcolm X foresaw that both the Black Muslims and the integrationists/assimilationists were aping the oppressor; that neither recognized that the struggle for black freedom was neither social nor moral. To Malcolm, it was a power struggle between the white haves and the black have-nots. Malcolm X's vision was also broad enough to see the parallels between the black struggle in America with their fellow brethren's struggle against white colonialists in Africa. In his letter from Lagos, Malcolm X wrote that "it is time for all African-Americans to become a part of the world's Pan-Africanists, and even though we might remain in America physically while fighting for the benefits the Constitution guarantees us, we must "return" to Africa philosophically and culturally and develop a working unity in the framework of Pan-Africanism." And so

Malcolm's perennial theme was unity, unity, unity (Clarke, 1969). Towards the end of his life, Malcolm X made several attempts to project the cause of Afro-American freedom into the international arena of power. Some writers believed that this was the main reason Malcolm X was killed. However, most Americans are led to believe that the violence and hate preacher, as the media had played him up as, called for his own death with his activities, and ideas.

Conclusion

The three phases in the development of Malcolm X's ideas, as a voice crying out for freedom of black American, manifest substantively the experiences that were governing his life. For a greater part of his life, he faithfully and devotedly gave himself to the fighting principle espoused by Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Thus, it is no surprise that America remembers him as a Black Muslim, militant and angry at the white establishment. At that time, Malcolm actually believed in what he was fighting for and how he should go about doing it. Examining his early background which was filled with racism and white oppression, it is unavoidable that Malcolm arose from his position filled with the very significant components that went into his making. The life story of Malcolm X in many ways is the life story of black people, and it is appropriate that Malcolm X remained as the most significant black leader that could reach the black masses in the ghettos and other lower class sections. According to Breitman (1965), Malcolm X was the rare case of a man in closest communion with the oppressed, able to speak to them, because he identified himself with them, an authentic expression of their yearning for freedom, a true product of their growth in the same way that Lenin was a product of the Russian people.

The second and third phases of the development of his ideas saw Malcolm X as still the angry speaker, but without the hate that had been so intense. At these levels, Malcolm X had been more able to put his ideas into proper perspective accordingly to the changes in his life and his times. All he ever wanted was for the black people to open up their consciousness and face the realities that they were in. Malcolm X was teaching the blacks the self discipline that they desperately needed to safeguard their integrity and dignity. It was stated that Malcolm X's basic principle governing his understanding of social change was racial self-determination. In his thought, racial self-determination was the first principle of any nationalism, and since it is sought by blacks, it must entail radical change in the American societal system (Paris, 1978). This was the revolutionist Malcolm demanding. Richardson and Fahey (1976) state that Malcolm X had experienced a spiritual rebirth in the Holy City of Mecca. And on the way back to America, traveling through Ghana and Nigeria, he experienced another kind of renewal, a discovery of his cultural roots. Malcolm X submitted to this, and the third

phase of the development of his ideas reflected the change as a result of the discoveries. This phase was cut short by his death, but it was generally acknowledged that at this time, Malcolm entered into an extremely fruitful if often chaotic period during which he was principally concerned with thinking through his own position (Storing, 1970). Just before his death, Malcolm X was quoted as saying: "I think the single worst mistake of the American black organization, and their leaders, is that they failed to establish direct brotherhood lines of communication between the independent nations of Africa and American black people "

For the young black Americans, the legacies that borne out of the man and the ideas, that were Malcolm X, can be summarized into the following: "What Brother Malcolm X taught us about ourselves - once a black man discovers for himself a pride of his blackness, he can throw off the shackles of mental slavery and become a MAN in the truest sense of the word." (SNCC Leaflet, 1967)

On his speaking style, Breitman commented that it was unique - plain, direct like an arrow, devoid of flower trimming. He used metaphors and figures of speech that were lean and simple, rooted in the daily experience of his audiences. Malcolm X knew what the masses thought and felt, their strengths and their weaknesses, for he was one of them. He reached right into their minds and hearts without wasting one word, and he never tried to flatter them. He spoke the truth and he told them the truth. Despite an extraordinary ability to move and arouse his listeners, his main appeal was to reason, not emotion. This observation is similar to the argument made by Berry and Blassingame (1982) that, in the face of all the beatings and bombings, Malcolm X's voice seemed to be one of reason, while that of Martin Luther King, Jr., James Farmer and Whitney Young appeared to be utopian.

In conclusion, to know Malcolm X is to know the man, and to know the man is to know his ideas and what he stood for. The message in Malcolm X's public communication, oral or written, is the story of his life. And in all his public communication, Malcolm X told his life story or where he was coming from. His message was his words which was largely his life. In short, Malcolm X spoke his life. Thus, Malcolm X, the man, is his ideas.

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